

## To the Saints

Ephesians 1:1-2

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*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,*

*To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus:*

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. – Ephesians 1:1-2, ESV*

Three most important questions we can ask about something:

1. What is it?
2. Where did it come from?
3. What's it for?

We ask variations on these questions to people:

1. Who are you? (What's your name?)
2. Where are you from??
3. What do you do?

Of course, the way we ask and answer these questions shows us a lot about our cultural worldview, the assumptions and values we bring to our conversations and life.

As we begin our study of the Book of Ephesians together, we're going to look at the first two verses to answer these three questions:

1. What is the book of Ephesians?
2. Where does it come from?
3. What is its purpose? What's it for?

We're going to find the answers to these questions and get ourselves prepared for the rest of the book by taking these two verses piece-by-piece, phrase-by-phrase. We'll find that the answers to these questions are not as simple as they may first appear, but that the answers will be helpful in preparing us for the book.

The first thing we can see in these two verses is that the book of Ephesians is a letter written by Paul, an Apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God. We know Ephesians is a letter because the opening two verses are in the standard letter format of the ancient world. We sign our names at the end of letters or e-mails, but in the ancient world, the author would identify himself up front, so the recipients of the letter know right away who the letter is from.

### 1. Paul

This letter is from Paul, the Apostle. Controversy and confusion over this letter unfortunately begin with this very first word. Many Bible scholars have questioned and challenged the idea that the Apostle Paul wrote this letter. This is based on another controversial aspect of the opening two verses, the named recipients being “the saints who are in Ephesus.” Those who object to the up-front claim that Paul wrote this letter say that the letter does not at all read like something the Apostle Paul would’ve written to the church in Ephesus. To understand why, we need a little background information:

The Apostle Paul was a traveling missionary, but of all the places he visited, he stayed in Ephesus longer than almost anywhere else, for almost three years, from the fall of the year 54 to the fall of the year 57. This is a church he knew well, and where he would send his young apprentice Timothy to serve as pastor after his departure. So, these critics ask, how is it possible that Paul could have written a letter that is so impersonal to this church he knew so well. What do they mean by “impersonal”?

Well, in chapter 1, verses 15-16, when Paul expresses his prayer for the Ephesians, he says, “*For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers . . .*” Why would the Apostle Paul say that he gives thanks for the Ephesians believers because he has heard of their faith in the Lord Jesus, if he ministered among them for three years?

And then, Paul begins chapter 3 with these words: “*For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ . . .*” This also doesn’t sound like the way a minister would write to a church he had led personally for three years.

So, one solution to these impersonal comments is to assert that Paul did not write Ephesians, but someone else from Rome wrote the letter and put Paul’s name on it. But trying to solve this puzzle in this way actually creates two other problems, one moral and the other practical:

1. Morally, if Paul didn’t write this letter, then the letter is fraudulent and deceptive, because it claims up front and again in chapter 3 to be written by Paul. In fact, Paul asserts his identity and apostolic authority strongly in this letter. If it’s not written by Paul, that’s a huge moral problem.
2. Practically speaking, though, if someone in Rome wanted to write a letter to Ephesus pretending to be the Apostle Paul, they would not be so impersonal. Everyone in the church knew that Paul spent three years in Ephesus, so a fraudulent writer would actually try to play up the personal contact Paul had had with the church, saying things like, “You know from the time I was with you that . . .” – which is how Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica in 1 and 2 Thessalonians and also how he writes to the church at Corinth. A fraudulent author trying to claim to be Paul would know enough to fake it better, in other words.

I think we do need an explanation for the impersonal nature of the letter, and we’ll get there in a few minutes when we discuss the phrase “to the saints who are in Ephesus.” But proposed solutions to problems that

actually multiply and magnify the problems are no solutions at all. We can simply conclude at this point that Paul wrote this letter. The language and ideas in it are definitely from Paul, as they match Colossians and Romans especially.

#### a. **An Apostle of Jesus Christ**

Paul identifies himself as “an apostle of Jesus Christ.” Apostle is a word that means someone who is sent as an emissary, like an ambassador, sent to represent the will of the king, carrying the authority of the king and speaking the message of the king.

In the New Testament, two groups of people are called “apostles” – the 12 who hold the office of Apostle because they were with Jesus during His earthly ministry, they saw Jesus after His resurrection from the dead and they were given the Great Commission personally by Jesus, being sent by Him to be His witnesses and to make disciples.

Another group of people are called apostles – including Barnabas, Silas and Timothy – who were commissioned by churches and sent out on missionary endeavors, often accompanying the Apostle Paul. These men had the gift and ministry of apostleship, but they did not carry the full authority of the office of Apostle.

Paul belongs to the first category, holding the office of Apostle in the church. He was unusual in this group, for he did not follow Jesus during His earthly ministry and was a violent persecutor of Christians in the earliest days of the church. But Paul describes the unusual way in which Jesus selected him for the office of Apostle in I Corinthians 15:3-10 –

*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. <sup>6</sup> Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. <sup>8</sup> Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. <sup>9</sup> For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. <sup>10</sup> But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. (ESV)*

When Paul says that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ, he means that he belongs to Jesus Christ, that Jesus is His Master, Ruler and Lord. He also means that He’s been sent by Jesus Christ to carry the message of Jesus Christ with the full authority of Jesus Christ. So what we have here in Ephesians is not just the thinking of Saul of Tarsus, better known in the Roman world as Paul. We have the message of the King, delivered by His royal emissary.

#### b. **By the Will of God**

Paul adds “by the will of God” lest anyone should think that he sought and obtained the office of Apostle for himself. Paul is only an Apostle by the will of God, not through any desire of his own. As we have already seen, he was riding to persecute Christians, dedicated to the extermination of the church, when Jesus confronted him and called him from being a persecutor to an apostle, from being a violent enemy of the King to being the King’s own royal ambassador.

Sadly, what we are seeing unfold in the Middle East right now is the most widespread, dedicated effort to exterminate the church of Jesus Christ from its birthplace and homeland that we have perhaps ever seen. Even Mohammed himself and his successors under the old Muslim caliphate did not seek to exterminate Christianity in places where ISIS now threatens Christian churches, populations and monasteries. Perhaps we could pray that God would not only protect His people but also raise up some Christian leaders even from the ranks of ISIS itself.

## II. To the Saints

To whom does the Apostle Paul write this letter? “To the saints who are in Ephesus.” Let’s deal first with this word “saint.” What is a “saint”? Well, the word “saint” literally means “holy one” and to be holy is to be set apart for God.

The best Biblical, New Testament definition is that a saint is a Christian, one who has been called by God to believe in Jesus Christ for salvation and has been set apart in this way by God and for God. The word “saints” is used 60 times in the New Testament and it is never used as a title for super-special, extraordinary Christian leaders. It is always used to refer to ordinary Christians. To put it simply: To be a real Christian according to the New Testament is to be a saint, a set apart member of God’s household, part of His holy people.

### a. Who Are in Ephesus?

And then comes the next controversial part of this short letter “who are in Ephesus.” It turns out that the words “in Ephesus” don’t appear in the oldest manuscript copies of this letter we have. The church father Origen and some others also did not believe this letter was addressed to the Ephesians. Some have suggested that this letter is the mysterious and otherwise missing “letter to the Laodiceans” that Paul mentions in Colossians 4:16. Yet most of our manuscript copies do have “in Ephesus” in them, even if the earliest copies do not. So what’s the best explanation?

Honestly, I’m not 100% sure, but I’ll give you what I think is the best theory:

Whether the words “in Ephesus” were in the original or not, it seem clear that this letter was not just intended for the church at Ephesus. Sometimes, in the ancient world, a letter would be sent with the intent that it would be read by multiple recipients in multiple places. This was long before the printing press, so they couldn’t just run off extra copies. Colossians 4:16, which I just mentioned, says, “*And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.*”

We do know that the Book of Revelation was such a circular letter, addressed to seven church in Asia Minor (present day Turkey), along a postal route, which included both the church at Ephesus and the church at Laodicea. In fact, the first church addressed in Revelation is Ephesus and the last church is Laodicea. And guess what city is right next to Laodicea? Colossae!

So, this letter could very well be “the letter from Laodicea” from Colossians 4:16 and also be to the Ephesians. If it was sent along the same postal route as Revelation, it would have started at Ephesus and it would’ve ended at Laodicea, where it could then be shared with the church in Colossae.

This “circular letter” theory would explain why some early copies don’t have “in Ephesus” in them. As the letter arrived at each church, they may have both read it and copied it. The church in Ephesus, which was the first and most prominent church in the delivery route, might have been addressed by Paul, but knowing that the letter was going to other churches, those other churches might have dropped the words “in Ephesus” out of their copies.

This also explains why the letter is so impersonal and has the otherwise strange language of Paul having heard of their faith and of them having heard of his ministry. Paul had not been to these other churches, and the language is similar to how he addresses the Colossians, another church he had never visited: “*We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints (Col. 1:3-4, ESV)*”

It’s also encouraging for us to know that this letter was not just intended for those “in Ephesus;” indeed, that it was meant for the whole church, including us.

#### **b. Faithful in Christ Jesus**

Besides calling the Christians to whom he is writing “saints,” he also says they are “faithful in Christ Jesus.” Like “saints” this is a word we can easily misunderstand. The word “faithful” here literally means “having faith,” so we could translate it as “to the saints who are in Ephesus and are believing in Christ Jesus. But it’s a little stronger than that, so perhaps “trusting in Christ Jesus” is better.

To be a saint emphasizes the fact that we are set apart for God. To be “faithful in Christ Jesus” emphasizes the One who has made us holy as we trust in Him and are in Him. We are holy because and only because we are trusting in Jesus Christ.

### **III. Greetings**

So far, we have seen where this letter comes from – It comes from Paul, but since Paul is an Apostle, it’s really a royal missive from King Jesus. We’ve seen who the letter is for – it’s for Christians in all churches, for all those who belong to God through faith in Jesus Christ. And now, in his greeting, Paul really reveals the purpose of his letter and indeed of his ministry.

### a. **Grace and Peace**

“Grace and peace to you.” This is a common way that Paul addresses churches. It’s how he greets the Romans, the Corinthians, the Galatians, the Philippians, the Colossians and the Thessalonians. It’s also how Peter greets Christians in his letters. So, this was obviously a conventional Christian greeting used by leaders of the early church. But just because it’s conventional doesn’t mean that it’s pointless, meaningless or a throw-away phrase. Far from it!

When the Apostle Paul says “grace and peace to you,” he’s summarizing the goal of his whole apostolic ministry. In fact, the word “grace” is the summary of the Gospel in one word and the word “peace” is the summary of the fruit of the Gospel in one word.

“Grace” is God’s undeserved favor and kindness to those who deserve His wrath and judgment. The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ came to redeem us so that we might receive grace from God – grace that both forgives us of our sin and declares us to be righteous and also empowers us to live a life of love, gratitude and obedience to God. Grace is both the favor of God that justifies us and the power of God that makes us holy. The title of this sermon series is “The Transforming Power of Grace” because that is, in many ways, the main message of Ephesians. Grace really does change everything!

And the chief fruit that grace brings into our lives is a three-fold peace: Peace with God, peace within ourselves and peace with one other in the body of Christ:

In Romans 5:1, Paul says *“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* That’s peace with God.

In Philippians 4:6-7, Paul says, *“do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* That’s peace within ourselves.

In Ephesians 2:14, Paul says, *“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.”* That’s peace with each other within the body of Christ.

Paul expresses his desire that the Christians who receive his message will have grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ because he knows that that’s what we most need. We need to walk in the grace of God and live out fruit of the peace of God. This is what Paul is teaching, praying, seeking to instill and wanting us to have more than anything else.

### b. **From God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**

This grace and peace which we need more than anything come only from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We will see exactly how we receive this grace and peace throughout this study especially in the first three chapters of this book, and then we’ll see how the grace and peace of God transform how we live in chapters four through six.

So, what do we have here, in this book of Ephesians? We have a royal letter from the King, delivered by His Apostle Paul, sent to all churches, to all believers in Jesus Christ, and in it, God wants us to know that we are His special people, set apart for Him through faith in Jesus Christ. He wants us to receive and live the grace and peace that come from Him through faith in Jesus Christ. We are His and He is ours. In Him we have our identity as saints, our trust as believers, the grace we need for salvation and life and the peace with God, ourselves and others that allows us to live a life of freedom and love.

All of this – our identity, our trust, the grace and peace – comes to us and is made possible for us only because of Jesus. Notice that Jesus Christ is named three times in these two short verses. He is named using both His title, Christ- which designates Him as our anointed Messiah, our Prophet, Priest and King – and by His name, Jesus, which designates Him as our Savior, since Jesus means “He saves.”

Paul is “an apostle of Christ Jesus.” The saints are “trusting in Christ Jesus.” Grace and peace come “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Three times in his short opening, Paul wants us to know this: We need Jesus. He is our King. He is our Savior. He is the fountain of grace. He Himself is our peace. We have everything in Him, and apart from Him, we have nothing!